



February 16, 2022
Rev Joan Burnett, DOC Chaplain
York CT
District 1199 New England
Before the Appropriations Committee

Good Evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Committee, my name is Joan Burnett. I am a resident of Griswold, former resident of New Haven, and an 1199 Delegate, representing the Chaplains at the Department of Corrections.

Whether supporting staff or inmates, DOC Staff Chaplains are tasked with providing spiritual support, education, pastoral care and counseling for staff, inmates, and their families. Chaplains are on the front line helping correctional staff and inmates manage life, grief and loss, stress and anxiety, fear, and death. Chaplains move gracefully from one role to another, from staff counselor to inmate guide, bringing calm in a stressful environment.

Chaplains give death notices to inmates and families losing loved ones. Chaplains minister to the sick, incarcerated people, juveniles and youth suffering with emotional, physical, and mental health and the coronavirus. Chaplains are there during times of despair.

These dedicated Chaplains are at high risk for burn out and compassion fatigue, particularly during a pandemic and staffing shortages. Some Chaplains are traveling across the state covering multiple facilities. There are eleven open Chaplain positions (7 Protestant, 1 Islamic, 2 Catholic, 1 Associate); in addition, to two scheduled retirements within a month (Director of Religious Services, 1 Associate)

As a supervising Chaplain, with over eight years of service, I see the impact staffing shortages have on chaplains; Increased illnesses, accidents, and fatigue. When chaplains are out of work, the inmates don't have the spiritual support needed to handle the trauma of incarceration or mental anguish associated with the pandemic. Since the pandemic, inmates have been quarantined regularly, which causes additional anxiety, depression, and stress, resulting in greater physical altercations and suicide attempts. In one day, I counseled three inmates suffering with guilt and grief due to family member deaths; one delusional inmate plagued with mental illness; a staff member overwhelmed by the physical aftereffects of the coronavirus; held a bible study group with protective custody inmates, and led two worship services, preaching at both. I also had administrative functions and had to record one service to broadcast on closed circuit television for women unable to attend the services. When I arrived home, to manage my own mental health, I shut down and practiced self-care.

Please help us by approving funds allocated to hire more staff and support the needs of the chaplains at the Department of Corrections.